



weaving new architectural narratives

*an exploration into the convergence of female agency,
textile storytelling and architecture*

// research plan

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ana maria suso - explore lab 37 - November 2023

01. *problem statement*

Textiles as equal to culture

"From our first direct evidence twenty thousand years ago, (textile making) has been the handiest solution to conveying social messages visually, silently, continuously." (Barber, 1996)

"Traditionally, the history of weaving is a history of women's work. Anthropological research has concluded that invariably women produced most of the textiles in the ancient world. By participating in the production of textiles - as well as the community that existed because of that production - women took part in the first textual practices, recording their society's stories, myths, and sacred beliefs in symbols woven or embroidered on their textiles. The scene they conveyed constituted society's first texts. During the time when weaving and storytelling were analogous, female participation was not always marked as a subculture, but women's endeavours were equal to culture and were not considered beneath culture or marginal to it." (Kruger, 2002)

Since its origin, textiles occupied a pivotal position within the economic and cultural structures of societies. Moreover, across diverse cultures, women assumed the role of master weavers, either directly engaging in the craft or embodying symbolic associations with textiles in roles such as patron saints or goddesses intimately linked to the domains of textile production and narrative discourse (Gordon, 2023). Beyond their utilitarian considerations, textiles even extended as far as to the realms of spirituality and mysticism, carefully crafted to retain symbols and stories of whole cultures within their fibers. (Kruger, 2002)



Figure 1 Terracotta lekythos, unknown (550-530 a.c.)

The rise of dichotomies

The ideological and societal transformations that arose in Europe during the Renaissance era instigated the formulation of firm binaries, the repercussions of which resonated globally, altering perspectives on gender roles, the delineation between public and private domains, and the classification of art (Parker, 1984). In contrast to non-Western cultures, wherein textiles were perceived as an integral part of art inseparable from that of painting or sculpture, the European Renaissance introduced a separation between fine arts and crafts, relegating textiles to the latter. Concurrently, this period fortified gender binaries regarding feminine and masculine ideologies, reinforcing the segregation of domestic and private spheres ascribed to each gender. Women found themselves relegated to the domestic sphere, expected to manage the household, and distanced from the public male-dominated domain (Parker, 1984). Within this system, the inferior crafts (amongst them textiles), women, and the domestic sphere coexisted beneath the superior arts (represented mainly by painting and sculpture), men, and the public sphere. An understanding of these binaries and their underlying hierarchies make evident the dismissal and silencing of the once-valued role of textiles in culture, as well as the recognition of women as masters of this craft.

“Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, was made in the domestic sphere, usually by women, for ‘love’. Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere, for money.” (Parker, 1984)



Figure 2 The girlhood of Mary Virgin, Rossetti, D (1849)

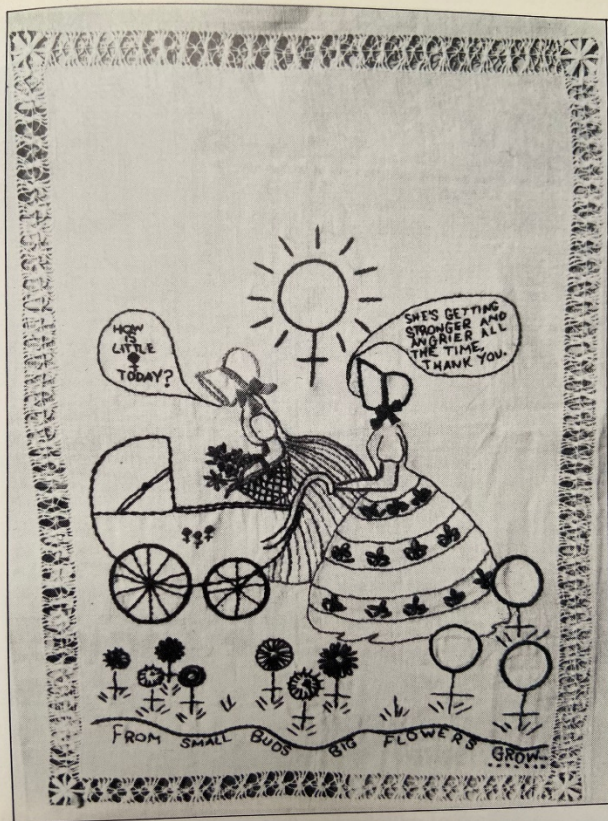


Figure 3 Embroidered runner, Weaver, B. (1978)

A medium of resistance

Amidst the strict structures of societal oppression that have historically impacted both the societal positioning of women and the significance of textiles within cultural contexts, a parallel narrative of resistance has emerged. As a result of confinement to the domestic spheres, women organized craft circles wherein to share knowledge about the craft and discuss matters afflicting their private lives with other women (Edwards, 2006). These circles served as a means for women to emancipate themselves from the constraints imposed upon them, both in terms of physical spaces and societal expectations, and consequently evolved into platforms fostering consciousness raising.

In more recent times, after the 1960s women's rights movement and influenced by anti-capitalist do-it-yourself (DIY) movements, third-wave feminists have turned their attention to textiles to reclaim a craft historically designated as feminine. In this way, women nowadays seek to validate the significance of this craft while expressing themselves through a medium that has less constraints imposed by patriarchal structures (Buck, 2016). Through feminist art and craftivism, women have transcended conventional boundaries by extending their activities into public spaces. This incursion serves as a mechanism for dismantling the traditional confines of the domestic sphere, occupying museums and public squares in silent protest (Shau, n.d.). Within this context, women convey their narratives through the medium of textiles, expressing resistance and the redefining socio-cultural spaces. The issue now becomes spatial, and when taken a step further, architectural, as women look for ways to occupy spaces they have been left out of.

Ultimately the history of textiles is undeniably a history of women authorship. It is unfortunate that the importance that this craft used to hold within culture in the past seems to now go unacknowledged, and disparaging it also means disparaging a whole medium for female expression and empowerment. Reclaiming textiles as both a female craft and a storytelling method, and using them as a tool for spatial transformation, will recover a large community of female authorship.



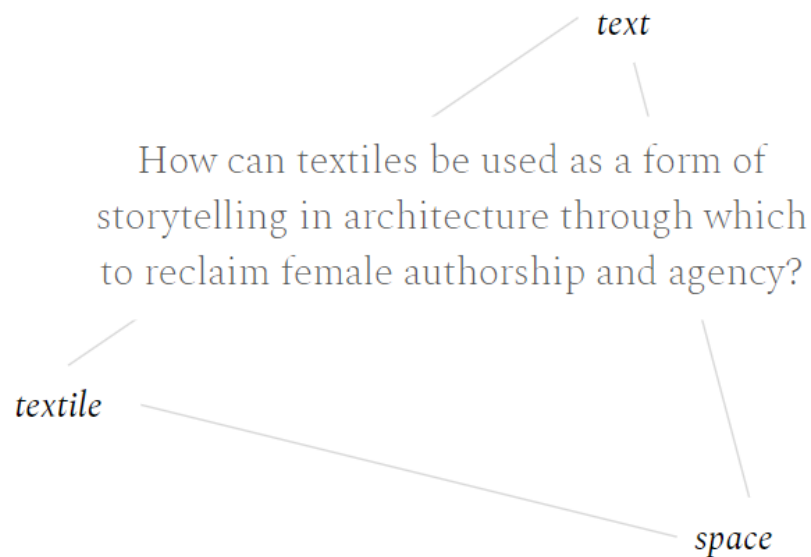
Figure 4 Making yarn, weaving, and knitting. (n.d.)



Figure 5 Community Arpillera Workshop, unknown (1976)

02. *research question(s)*

In an attempt to explore the relation between text, textiles, and space, with female agency at the centre, I formulated the following research question:



From this question stem another two sub-questions:

How do present-day women act as storytellers through the making of textiles?

... and how do their stories echo those of the women before them?

What is the relation between texts (storytelling), textiles (material) and space (architecture) in current times?

Historical context and intersectionality

As I already outlined in the problem statement, there is a historical dismissal of textiles and a silencing of women's roles that resulted from the genderization of textile production under patriarchal structures. Though some of my initial research points towards the European Renaissance and subsequent industrialization period for the ideologies that imparted such strong divisions amongst gender roles and the arts, there is a more diverse historical and temporal timeline to be researched.

Feminist spatial practices can provide a framework for understanding how the relegation of textiles to the domestic sphere was part of a larger pattern of spatial inequality and gendered norms. Additionally, following the concept of intersectionality brings forth the relevance of diversity behind women's experiences, opening up the problem to address diverse histories spanning across culture, class, sexuality and race.

Use of alternative materialities to voice resistance and agency

Feminist spatial practices call for more qualitative forms of gender inclusion and representation, and bring up the use of alternative materialities as a manner in which to broaden the ways of making within the built environment. Given the connection between textiles and women's history, they can be seen through this lens as an expressive material for women through which to challenge societal norms.

Textiles have been used by women as a language of resistance, albeit in different forms. Examples of this range from ancient myths in which women weavers used their looms to manipulate destiny, British Victorian women who stitched their frustrations into embroidered samplers, the formation of consciousness-raising craft circles, and the quilted protest banners of women activists in the 60s. The diverse ways in which textiles are interwoven with a history of women empowerment serve as proof of its potential as an expressive medium, and one that has also shown its potential to become spatial.

Spatial transformation and the shattering of the public/private binaries

The separation that exists between the public and private domains is ultimately an issue of gender and social justice. Reiterating what I have already pointed out in the problem statement, the division between these two spheres stems from the notion that women must occupy the role of homemaker and carer, and must therefore remain within the private sphere, separate from the male-dominated public sphere. It is then not surprising that much of the spaces that have been designed under these oppressive structures have excluded the needs

of a large portion of the population. Feminist spatial practices critically examine and challenge the traditional division of space, recognizing that this division has often reinforced gender inequalities.

Moving forward with this research, I intend to explore how textiles can be used for spatial transformation that emphasizes storytelling, and that amplifies the voice of its maker. Feminist spatial practices then provide a theoretical framework for understanding how such transformations can challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to the creation of more inclusive and empowering spaces for women.



Figure 7 Anni Albers in her weaving studio at Black Mountain College, 1937. © 2017 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation

Figure 8 Penelope and the Suitors, Waterhouse, J.W., (1912)



04. methodology

The purpose of this research is to explore the relation between textiles, texts, and architecture, all within the context of female empowerment. Though at first glance the connections between some of these themes may appear evident, I find it important to point out that many of these links are in fact missing or their connection has not yet been explicitly researched. Not only this, but I have also found that much of the information surrounding the topic is naturally highly personal and diverse, especially that of the connection between women and textiles as a form of self-expression. Because of this, I concluded that my research calls for a method that is equally personal and diverse, and that allows for qualitative research that can span across multiple contexts, temporalities, and disciplines. For all that, this research will use Participatory Narrative Inquiry as its primary method, supplemented by literature review.

Participatory narrative inquiry

Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) is a research approach that emphasizes collaboration and active involvement of participants in the exploration and understanding of personal and collective stories. It is a qualitative research method that seeks to uncover and interpret the meaning of narratives within a specific context. PNI places a strong emphasis on empowering participants to share their stories, contributing to a more inclusive and participatory research process. Additionally, not only do the participants have the opportunity to share their stories, but they are also involved in the processing of the data by following community sense-making sessions where the conclusions and research outputs are discussed and approved as a community. Therefore, PNI recognizes participants as co-creators of knowledge and seeks to involve them in the research process, from data collection to interpretation (Kurtz, 2014).

In the context of this research, I will combine PNI with craft circles to gather personal stories from a diverse group of women who are involved with textile making, and then as a community interpret these stories together to unearth the connections between this craft, our voices, and the spaces we inhabit. The purpose of using the craft circle as part of the method is to replicate the kind of environment in which women have historically converged to share with one another, and which has proven itself to be a catalyst for communication because of the comfortable setting it creates.



Figure 9 Knitting in the park, unknown (1945)

This method will follow the following structure:

1. Establishing the network

The first step is to build the network of women that will participate in this research and introduce them to the topic and purpose of my research. The goal is to assemble a diverse group of participants who are eager to collaborate in the creation of this new narrative.

2. Individual interviews – first collection of personal stories

The first step in my collection of stories will be done in a more personal setting to get myself acquainted with the personal story and background of each of the participants.

3. Craft circles – community sense-making and second collection of stories

The group will be brought together in a crafting circle, where the individual stories will be opened to the group to allow for new interpretations and new stories. As a group we will make sense of these stories and draw conclusions.

4. Workshop – co-creation of narratives

The final step is the co-creation of the final research output.



Figure 10 Arachne, Veronese, P. (1520)



Figure 11 women's sit-in at the Greenham Common women's peace camp, unknown, (1983)

Literature review

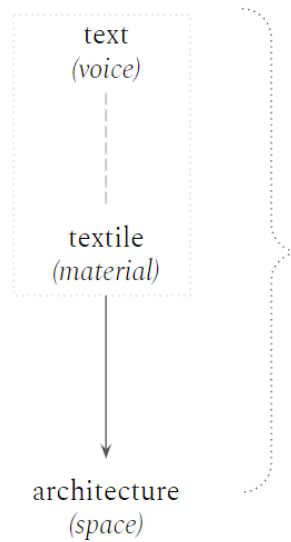
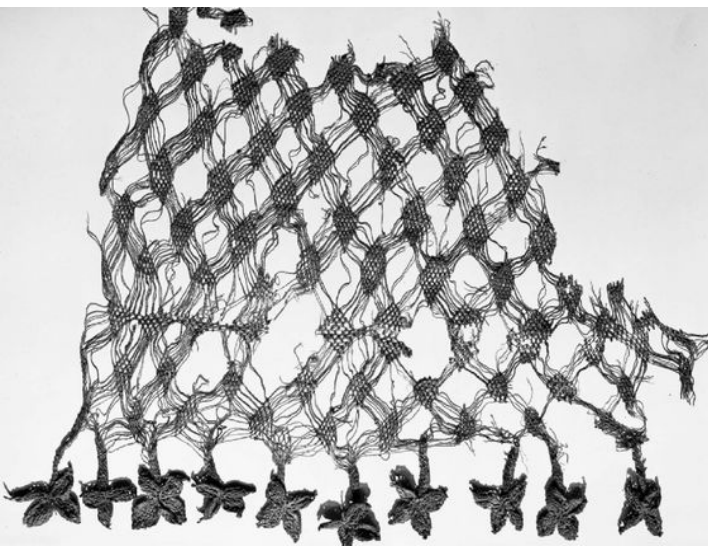
In addition to participatory narrative inquiry, I will use literature review as a way to enrich the discussions carried out in the main research method. The word “literature” here is used loosely, encompassing all forms of text from poems to paintings to folklore.

I find it incredibly important to understand the (hi)stories of the women in the past in order to understand the (hi)stories of the women in the present. It is particularly insightful to draw connections and parallels between all the stories, transcending cultures, disciplines, and temporalities.

05. *outcome*

The intended outcome of this research is an anthology of all the stories which as a collection portray a narrative of female agency that connects texts, textiles, and architecture.

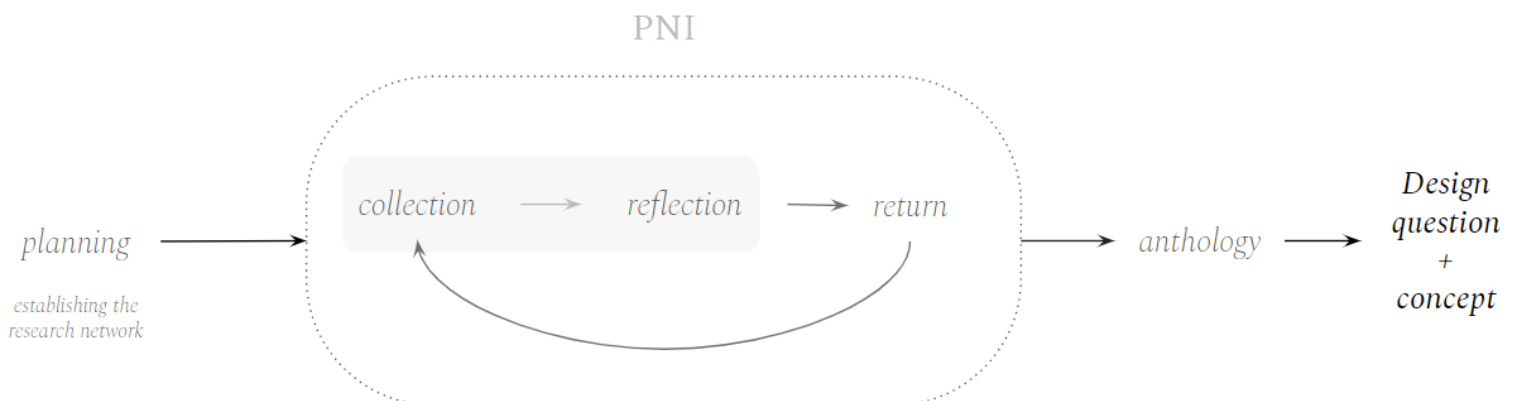
The compilation of these stories will also inform the design carried out in the second phase of the project.



Design problem

How can a space tell a story of female empowerment using similar syntax as textiles?

Research progression timeline



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